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# **Identity on the line: Constructing Professional Identity in a HR Call Centre**

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## **Abstract**

This article applies insights from the social construction of professional identity to an understanding of the 'professional service' call centre representative (CSR). In this case, HR (Human Resources) practitioners found themselves in a CSR role in a newly constituted HR call centre and this research explores how they then (re-)constructed their role as professionals within this context. Through a longitudinal, ethnographic study, three key constructions are identified through which CSRs made claims for a professional identity: 'our work is complex'; 'our work adds value'; and 'our work is unique'. The analysis highlights that a contemporary concern with re-orienting HR to a strategic role may lead to perceived segregation and the re-negotiation of professional identities vis-à-vis other groups of HR professionals. Overall, this research challenges accepted norms and definitions of both call centre work and professional identity, suggesting that both are contested and localised constructions achieved through identity work.

**Key Words:** Call Centre, Human Resource Management, Professional Identity

**Running Title:** Constructing professional identity

## **Introduction**

Research attention is increasingly turning to the range of employee experience within different types of call centres, with Batt and Moynihan's (2002) classification of 'classic mass production', 'professional service' and the intermediate 'mass customisation' (p14) models forming the basis for much analysis (Russell, 2008). Here, the 'professional service' model is depicted as encompassing more individualised interaction between caller and CSR, thus requiring a higher level of skill and knowledge. However, such descriptions have been criticised as over simplistic by researchers investigating these sites (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005, Smith et al., 2008), and it is clear that more specific analyses of this particular type of work organization are called for (Russell, 2008). This article contributes to this line of work by investigating the experiences of CSRs working in a Human Resources (HR) call centre. This article applies insights from the social construction of professional identity to examine how CSRs constructed and legitimated their status as professionals in this particular context. Professional status is positioned as a contested and complex issue for CSRs, negotiated through defining relationships with other actors, including technology (Goode and Greatbatch, 2005). This focus on how work is actively constructed by the CSRs themselves differs from much previous research which has focused on institutional level processes (e.g. Batt and Moynihan, 2002), work organization (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 1999) or CSRs' subjective experiences (e.g. Holman, 2002).

The specific context of this exploration is HR, which is relatively under-explored in the call centre literature (Batt et al., 2003, Russell, 2008). The professional status of HR has been of ongoing academic and practitioner interest. Commentators suggest a sub-division of HR is necessary to achieve the strategic goals of the profession (Reilly et al., 2007). One response is the implementation of HR call centres to deal with employee enquiries, freeing others to work in a more strategic capacity (Keegan and Francis, 2008). Implemented under the banner of 'shared service centres', the UK HR professional body's (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) own research (Parry et al., 2007) suggests there is no consistent form but notes they 'are increasingly enabled by technology' (CIPD, 2008, p2). While there is considerable interest in strategic HR roles, shared service centres have received much less attention in the research literature (Keegan and Francis, 2008).

This article aims to re-dress this imbalance, investigating the implications of applying work processes common to call centres to the HR role. In this case, the HR call centre was located within a HR department; in contrast to many call centres which are stand-alone or outsourced (Batt et al., 2003). This context provided the opportunity to explore how call centre work is positioned with respect to other HR practices.

This study bridges a gap between research on the social construction of professional work and the specific investigation of professional service call centres thus opening up a new perspective on professional service call centre work: how is such work constructed by those involved? Further additions to the HR literature are offered through generating insights into roles and practices in the relatively new context of the HR call centre.

### **Call centre work**

Generically, the call centre has been depicted as a ‘hi-tech factory’ (Glucksman, 2004, p796) in which employees ‘provide direct telephone based customer service and selling’ (Taylor et al., 2002, p135). A focus of research has been the extent to which the technological mediation of work processes (including call distribution, scripting and monitoring) results in impoverished and highly controlled jobs (Taylor and Bain, 1999, Lloyd and Payne, 2009). However, Holman (2002) proposes that under certain conditions (i.e. more discretion for employees and supportive management) ‘call centre work compares favourably with shop floor manufacturing and clerical work with regard to well-being’ (p46). Additionally, while call centre work can be considered an individualised labour process (Korczynski, 2003), team interaction has been recognised as an important support mechanism in dealing with the mismatch of organizational goals and work systems (van den Broek et al., 2008) and the emotional labour of the work (Korczynski, 2003).

Despite advances in understanding, it is increasingly difficult to talk of an archetypal call centre and understanding divergence has become a key focus of investigation (van den Broek, 2008). While there are many lists of call centre types, Batt and Moynihan’s (2002) categorisation is the most widely applied in empirical studies (Russell, 2008) and distinguishes between ‘classic mass production’, ‘professional service’ and the intermediate ‘mass customisation’ models (p14). Of interest here is the professional service model, often portrayed as an ideal scenario in

terms of work processes and relationships (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005). Batt and Moynihan (2002, p17) suggest that in such centres the 'specialised skills of employees are very high; and the design of work builds on the independent discretion of professional employees'. However, while suggesting this category of call centre 'is exemplified by lawyers and health care professionals' (p17) it is sketched in rather broad terms. Furthermore, those conducting empirical work in these call centres have contested the somewhat idealised representation, particularly as aspects of process and technological control may remain (Russell, 2008). Collin-Jacques and Smith (2005) call for a greater understanding of the work of professional service call centres rather than simply categorising them as universally different from other types.

### **Professional service call centres and professional identity**

Empirical studies of professional service call centres have focused on social and medical care, examining the changing dynamics of patient relationships (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005, Hanlon et al., 2005), and highlighting professional work and status as contested, complex issues for employees (Goode and Greatbatch, 2005, Valsecchi et al., 2007, van den Broek, 2003, Coleman and Harris, 2008, Smith et al., 2008). Such research investigates how individuals attempt to embed 'traditional' aspects of their professional work within the call centre environment (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005), being faced with new challenges as they negotiate their status and credibility with, and through, technology (Goode and Greatbatch, 2005, Smith et al., 2008, Hanlon et al., 2005). These studies particularly focus on perceived contrasts with face-to-face care contexts and tension between 'professional' and 'administrative' roles. For example, studies of NHS Direct have highlighted tensions between nurses and call handlers with respect to responsibility for patient care (e.g. Goode and Greatbatch, 2005). Furthermore, they highlight differing constructions of knowledge by management and professional (usually nursing) staff, with the former emphasising the need for (usually technologically-enabled) routinised practices to ensure consistency and safe-guard patient safety, while the latter draw on personalised knowledge constructions such as qualification and experience to meet patient needs (e.g. Smith et al, 2008). The extent of management control via technology is a continuing theme although it is suggested that professional identity may provide a resource for resistance unavailable in 'mass production' call centres.

Such research has tended to examine these issues with respect to the societal and institutional framing of professional identity (Valsecchi et al., 2007), with less detailed analysis of the (individual and collective) processes by which different constructions of knowledge, identity and practice emerge and interact. Furthermore, it is assumed that particular professional identities (e.g. nurses) are relatively robust, unproblematic resources for individuals working within the call centre environment (Collin-Jacques and Smith, 2005). Ideas provided by recent social constructionist studies of professional identity are introduced as offering a means of opening up these issues for further analysis.

For many years emphasis was placed on defining professional work and categorising occupations accordingly (Watson, 2002). The term profession denoted an occupation which could 'claim special esoteric competence and concern for the quality of its work and its benefits to society, obtain the exclusive right to perform a particular kind of work, control training for and access to it and control the right to determining and evaluating the way in which work is performed' (Freidson, 1973, p22). Such normative definitions seem out of place in a more dynamic world of work, in which professions have to maintain their position 'in the face of pressures from consumers, co-producers and wider regulatory agencies' (Collins et al., 2009, p253). Devine et al (2000) are amongst those identifying 'diversification, inter-professional competition, [and] organisational change' (p251), along with the commodification of knowledge (Covaleski et al., 2003) and an increasingly broad interpretation of 'professionalism' (Fournier, 2001), as challenges to previous conceptions of 'the professional' at work. In sum, the 'lexical minefield' of defining professional work (Collins et al., 2009, p253) has prompted increasing interest in its specific, situated meanings.

Contemporary research examines how professional legitimacy and credibility are socially constructed and continuously performed by individuals (Collinson, 2003). As Cohen et al (2005) suggest, an emerging focus is 'the extent to which traditional meanings of professionalism continue to resonate (if indeed they ever did), or whether they are being supplanted by more contingent, or perhaps more organizationally based conceptualizations' (p779). Being a professional is therefore an emergent, unpredictable and localised process rather than a label awarded by virtue of education and certification (Watson, 2002). The term 'identity work' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) encapsulates this process, highlighting that 'people are continuously engaged in

forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (p626). This identity work becomes more challenging when both broader professional and local organizational contexts are seen as fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and static (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Recent studies, therefore, examine how professional identity might be *achieved* in respect to both local (organizational) and broader (institutional and societal) contexts.

Empirical work includes studies of actuaries (Collins et al., 2009), artists (Bain, 2005), accountants (Anderson-Gough et al., 2002), doctors, (Iedema et al., 2003) architects (Cohen et al., 2005), and journalists (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Studies have investigated 'how individual agents experience, shape, reconstruct and are subject to the situational and structured "realities" they inhabit' (Ybema et al., 2009, p301). The literature highlights the ongoing importance of claims to specialist knowledge, value and client service (Dent and Whitehead, 2001) in constructing professional work. Of particular relevance to the empirical context explored later, is the suggestion that professional identity work is more likely to be triggered for those working in organizational contexts when role change threatens expected career development (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). This suggestion further highlights the importance of examining both the positioning of profession itself (here, HR) and the specific organizational context within which individual professionals find themselves.

### **HR professionals**

Bolton and Muzio (2008) suggest that HR is part of the 'aspiring professional project' (p283) of management within the UK, with the CIPD playing a key institutional role (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). However, professional insecurity (Caldwell and Storey, 2007) remains a central feature of discussions regarding HR (Rynes, 2004). In response, HR professionals are depicted as embracing a strategic orientation and emphasising their unique capacity to enhance employee performance and deliver value through alignment with organizational goals (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). For example, the CIPD's (2009) annual report states they 'offer cutting-edge research, practical tools, information, qualifications and a set of Professional Standards that enhance the standing and credibility of the profession' (p6). In this respect there is a continuing use of professional rhetoric (Bolton and



Muzio, 2008) in an attempt to both define, and secure organizational ownership of, strategic people management.

However, the move towards strategic HR also sub-divides HR work (and the individuals performing them) with the CIPD suggesting a ‘three legged stool model’ (Reilly et al., 2007, ix) of shared services, centres of expertise and strategic partners. While there is some commentary on implementation challenges (Cooke, 2006), the experience of HR professionals working within shared service (call) centres has received little attention (Caldwell and Storey, 2007).

Shared service centres are seen as an effective way of delivering aspects of HR thereby freeing up others for strategic roles (Keegan and Francis, 2008). This segregation presents a particular challenge for employees who find themselves in less favourable positions vis-à-vis the broader strategic rhetoric of the profession (Rynes, 2004). This issue may be exacerbated when, as in the HR department studied here, individuals with HR career aspirations are placed in call centre roles, a type of organizational change likely to trigger professional identity work (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Therefore, while a HR call centre may fall into Batt and Moynihan’s (2002) category of professional service call centres (since staff are professionally qualified and focus on quality of service), it is suggested that the context of HR presents particular challenges for these individuals’ identity work (Caldwell and Storey, 2007, Pritchard, 2010).

## **Research context and approach**

The specific context investigated is the HR department of an investment bank which had recently reorganized processes, roles and technology to streamline operations and improve client service, reflecting broader moves within the HR profession. The creation of a call centre as a ‘one-stop-shop’ for employees was positioned as essential in enabling these goals. This was a small call centre, comprising 10 CSRs (seven female, three male) led by a team manager and located in a different building from the majority of the HR department. It was positioned as the primary HR contact for employees, itself a significant change, as previously local HR generalist teams had been responsible for employee liaison and resolving employees enquiries. However, these teams were disbanded and replaced by strategic partners dealing only with senior management. The call centre launch was presented as

successful due to the number of calls received (approximately 4000 per month). Calls covered all aspects of HR (e.g. assessment and promotion criteria; retirement planning; employment relations issues).

The 10 staff appointed as CSRs had previously been junior members of local HR teams. They had two to five years HR experience and had either completed or were near completing their professional CIPD post-graduate qualification, demonstrating commitment to a HR career. Previously, they would have worked alongside more seasoned HR professionals to learn by experience. Now they were both physically and organizationally separate from others in HR. In addition, training was offered to those moving to functional expert and strategic partner roles but not to the CSRs, such that the gap between these roles appeared to be widening. Furthermore, during implementation, the CSR job description narrowed and an earlier promise of time away from the phones to participate in other types of activity was not realised. It is suggested that the move to the call centre is a potentially problematic positioning for these individuals based on their understandings of HR professional work (acquired from both previous experience and via their professional education) and their career expectations.

The research within this organization was part of a year long ethnography, during which the first author spent three days per week working within the HR department, including the call centre team. This approach enabled ongoing contact with participants and the opportunity to examine the broader context of call centre work (Russell, 2008). Data were collected via observation and participation in meetings (20 hours of team meetings were recorded), frequent informal discussions (involving all CSRs, logged in field notes), from documents (communication materials, job descriptions, policies and reports) and individual interviews. Each of the 10 CSRs and their team manager initially participated in individual, recorded interviews. Nine follow-up interviews were later held with the CSRs during the course of the research, giving a total of 20 recorded interviews. The first author also had certain restricted system access to read anonymised summary call and case information. Access was managed by one of the CSRs, who used it to explain processes issues, thus the confidentiality of the records was maintained. Ethical issues were reviewed regularly by both authors, and with organizational representatives, throughout the research project.

NVivo (qualitative analysis software) was employed to organise, and maintain links between, data. Initial thematic coding highlighted contrasting accounts of call centre work which drew attention to identity work as a useful way of unpacking the CSRs' own constructions when considered within both the local and broader HR professional context. Using NVivo, through an iterative process of coding and re-coding (King, 1998) maps of the relationships between data and emerging themes were created, guided by discussions in the literature concerning aspects of professional identity work, such as 'quality', 'added value', 'expertise', 'knowledge', 'client service'.

Next more detailed, discursive analysis of texts was undertaken to facilitate consideration of the CSRs' localised identity work, unpacking their 'individual meaning making' (Cohen et al., 2005, p776) while paying attention to both 'how people use language' and 'how language uses people' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, p1126). This analysis was achieved via the practice of 'close reading' (Wetherell et al., 2001) in a process that Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) describe as 'a circular movements between an overall understanding and closer textual analysis' (p153). This analysis is not presented as a singular 'truth' but suggests that the themes identified offer insight into, and aid understanding of, how HR CSRs attempt to construct and legitimate a professional identity within a call centre environment.

## **Results**

As argued earlier, organization change can be a particular trigger to professional identity work, and indeed one of the CSR's commented that they were now at 'the bottom of the food chain in terms of HR' in respect to their positioning relative to the functional experts and strategic partners, career development opportunities and due to the perceived nature of call centre work. This positioning is further explained below and is followed by a presentation of key analytic themes.

Supported by ACD technology, in principle, on receiving a call a CSR either provides information directly (termed 'one and done') or opens a 'case' on the work management system and then assigns the case to a functional expert. Once a case is raised, the call is closed and the CSRs are expected to play no further part. The CSRs have access to a knowledge base containing policy information together with scripts for common queries. Again, in principle, the intention is to match questions to

answers, increasing the chances of ‘one and done’ call resolution. There are no formal specialisations within the team and calls are randomly assigned.

Information sent to employees to launch the call centre service explained that:

Here is the one number you’ll need to contact HR. You can complete a wide range of transactions and if you need additional assistance, a knowledgeable HR advisor will help...questions that can’t be answered immediately will be acknowledged and answered as soon as possible by a subject matter expert.

Although the CSR is introduced as ‘knowledgeable’, their role is positioned as ‘help’ and ‘assistance’. This positioning is further emphasised by the differentiation between ‘calls’ and ‘cases’: CSRs answer calls, ‘subject matter experts’ resolve cases. The notion of a case invokes professional analogies to, for example, medical or legal work in which diagnosis and resolution is a skilled activity. Overall, the process is depicted as straightforward and technologically managed; a depiction which contrasts with the more complex (professional) work associated with other HR teams.

The three constructions explored below are suggested as key to understanding these CSRs’ professional identity work: ‘our work is complex’, ‘our work adds value’ and ‘our work is unique. These analytic themes reflect an understanding of the CSRs’ professional identity work in relation to preceding discussions of professionalism, HR and call centre work. Specifically, they represent these CSRs’ specific, localised constructions of their work as HR professionals, drawing on both a broader understanding of professional work and their recent move to the HR call centre. Within this challenging environment for the CSRs’ professional identity work the nature of calls and cases, and the work required to resolve them, becomes highly contested.

The theme of *complexity* reflects the importance of esoteric knowledge in professional work, and the contestation of the CSRs’ role as simple call answering. *Adding value* draws on the broad professional service discourse which is specifically tied to organizational value generation in the field of HR. Finally, establishing *uniqueness* is central in discussions of professional jurisdiction and the role models that are pivotal in HR professional discourse; models which are experienced by these CSRs in the local context of role reorganization and their positioning with the HR call centre.

## **Our Work is Complex**

Here the CSRs (during a team meeting) discuss conflicting views of their role:

CSR6: I think the HR teams underestimate the calls...they wouldn't imagine people call up about performance management and they think it's literally, "where do I park my car?"...all people leave on their voice mails is "for general policy information please call CSRs". They don't have any conception of the questions that come in.

CSR5: it should be "random"; "for any random questions call the CSRs"  
(all laugh)

CSR3: yeah (more laughter)

CSR6: people don't ask "what is the policy on?" They say "oh, I'm in this weird situation, I'm worried, no-one seems able to be able to help me, but I've been told that you're quite helpful" (said ironically, more laughter).

Through such dialogue the CSRs work up a claim to a more complex role than simply answering calls with scripted responses. The case is made that as others 'underestimate' the calls, they also underestimate the CSRs themselves and indeed employees' concerns. Given the importance of performance management within HR professional discourse, the contrast with car parking reinforces this claim. This construction is developed through mocking 'general policy information', which provides an opportunity (within the team) to criticise other HR professionals as out of touch with employee needs. This process highlights the collaborative nature of professional identity work which acts to reinforce their preferred account.

Note how CSRs employed both real and hypothetical stories to argue their case. These often depicted queries that were, in relation to call statistics, unusual and might be considered 'extreme' rather than routine. These enabled CSRs to highlight their role as proactive and problem solving, in line with an analytical 'professional' identity. For example:

That's such a good example, he was retiring, had medical issues, there's always some situation, they're retiring, they've handed in their notice, they've got mental problems, they're at risk...there's so many prongs sticking in...you have to talk to leavers, benefits, payroll...you can't get that without talking to the people and saying how does your bit fit into my situation.

This call is presented as a 'good example'; a foundation for generalising to all calls of this nature, a construction that is reinforced through the repetition of issues, some of which are more extreme formulations ('mental problems'). The process of raising a case is presented as complex, requiring additional analysis by the CSR. Building up the task of call answering into problem solving can be seen as an attempt to depict this as 'real', or legitimate, professional work.

This issue of complexity featured in a story concerning promotion criteria:

People were asking, “are there promotion criteria? What do I have to do to be promoted?”... and it raises issues like actually have we got clear promotion criteria? And, in fact, we haven’t, but then we can go to [HR management] and say, “right, actually we are getting calls from [senior manager] who says he wants to promote somebody and he’s not sure what the criteria is” if you’ve got [senior manager] who doesn’t know that information that’s a bit of a worry, yeah, that’s an issue (laughs)... this is absolutely fundamental to HR, we’re missing a real trick here.

Attributing this call to a senior manager acts to highlight the severity and adds weight to the importance of the CSR role. The CSRs’ claim insight into issues that are ‘fundamental to HR’, a construction that serves to emphasise their professional credibility, particularly within the context of the recent HR role changes.

Overall, the CSRs in their team meetings and through their stories, construct their work as more complex than answering calls, arguing these are more than simple requests but rather require the exercise of problem-solving skills and the application of professional knowledge. Through the depiction of the work itself as complex, the CSRs can mount a more effective claim to providing a ‘professional’ service.

### **Our Work adds Value**

In addition to contesting their role as ‘merely’ answering calls or raising cases, the CSRs also argue that technology alone is insufficient to meet callers’ needs. This features a direct criticism of the capabilities of the technology, achieved here by unpacking the history of the knowledge base (during a team meeting):

We got approached at the last minute, like, “it looks a mess can you tidy it up?” (laughter) ...they had gone to each team and said “send stuff to put in the knowledge base”...some of them sent every document, you know really everything; some of them sent nothing...it’s just, you know, very haphazard, so if we could develop it to be our tool it would be great, if we could stick all our stuff in that we need to know.

Although the knowledge base is depicted as a tool for the CSRs, decisions about the content were taken elsewhere, causing problems for the CSRs. The request: ‘can you tidy it up?’ provokes laughter as it draws on (and reinforces) a shared view of the way in which problems with the knowledge base are trivialised by others. It further provides an opportunity for the CSRs to reject a merely administrative role. Indeed rather than providing others’ knowledge, the CSRs suggest it could be much improved if they took control; if it could be ‘our tool’ with ‘our stuff’. This construction suggests CSRs possess more appropriate knowledge, contradicting the way in which the role is depicted as reliant on both the technology itself and through this, reliant on the knowledge of others in HR. This notion of possessing unique

knowledge, 'our stuff', is an important aspect of building a claim for professional credibility.

The CSRs adopted a dual pronged attack of both criticising the technology itself and also the process of consulting the knowledge held on it. As one CSR commented:

If we swallowed the knowledge base tomorrow, yeah we could all regurgitate the words...but that is no substitute for applying that knowledge in a situation...otherwise we would have robots sitting at the end of the phone just reading out scripts...if we just did that, from a career development point of view, we'd be a load of skeletons.

Here the role is presented as much more than 'just reading out scripts', challenging the process of matching questions to answers on the knowledge base. The term 'robot' further contests the importance of a technological solution to dealing with employees' calls; this is 'no substitute' for CSRs' personal, potentially professional, experience and knowledge. This CSR further highlights the difficulty that this conception of their work signals for future career development, reinforcing that the development of professional knowledge is a critical aspect of further HR career possibilities.

Overall, it is suggested that the CSRs present the knowledge base as problematic. In assigning blame for the problems with it to others within HR, CSRs' draw on and reinforce the earlier suggestion that others fail to understand the CSR role and therefore the knowledge required. The usefulness of the knowledge base is contested while the CSRs construct a proactive (professional) role for themselves in terms of adding value to the interaction with callers, both applying and developing their professional experience. In this representation, the work will never be routine enough to rely solely on technology and requires the intervention of 'professional', knowledgeable staff.

### **Our Work is Unique**

CSRs explained how they act on the employees' behalf:

If someone says "I haven't been paid", they're obviously angry and they don't want to hear "I'm gonna raise a case and someone will get back to you"...you've no idea when someone will go back to them so you end up trying to solve it yourself...for your own career development as well, I'm interested to find out the answer.

This CSR presents an example in which it is relatively uncontroversial to place herself on the employee's side, which provides justification for her explanation, that she ends

up “trying to solve it’. This is in the employee’s best interests as opposed to raising a case (the official procedure). Thus the CSR is able to adopt a proactive and problem-solving role and demonstrate that she knows how to help. This construction also demonstrates this CSR’s concern with professional development, here depicted as developing personal expertise.

In another interview, a CSR summarised their role in supporting employees:

Often we’re the last resort ...they’re frustrated, “I call HR and blah-blah-blah” and we get it in the neck..... you know, they just want an independent neutral person that they can just get a problem off their chest..... what I’m benefiting from this role is that you get much more of a temperature check of what’s going on.

The idea of the CSR as the ‘last resort’ depicts them as stepping in where others have failed, an almost heroic professional service positioning. The construction of CSRs as ‘independent, neutral’ further plays to notions of professionalism and establishes an extended role as mediating or counselling. These constructions exemplify how CSRs stake a claim for a unique role within the new HR organization: that of understanding and being on the side of the employees. Accompanying this construction is an implicit claim to the professional knowledge and experience that enables them to provide this service. This CSR suggests a further useful consequence of this positioning is having a ‘temperature check’ of the organization. This provides a foundation for claiming valuable knowledge to inform HR decisions more broadly, a move which blurs the (professional) boundaries drawn between call centre and strategic HR roles in the recent reorganization.

In a similar vein, the following story featured in a CSR presentation at a HR departmental meeting:

I think a common misconception is that CSRs, yes, they have policy information, but there is a human element to this and I don’t think we should ever lose sight of that. We had a call the Thursday before Easter from an employee scheduled to have an operation the following Wednesday. The surgeon she wanted wasn’t one of our recognised surgeons and she was obviously very worried. [The CSR] took the call and immediately went to see the Benefits team, who liaised with [the health insurers] and we were able to go back to that lady the Thursday before Good Friday to reassure her that we could accept that surgeon. And she was so happy, she cried and I think we shouldn’t lose sight of that, so the personal element I think is key to what we’re doing here.

This story is offered in response to a ‘common misconception’; the issue of losing sight of the ‘human element’ of the CSRs’ work, developing the constructions explored in previous sections. The ‘human element’ is highlighted as ‘key’ in this



emotive story in which the CSR appears the hero of the hour. Note that the CSR does not raise a case but ‘immediately went to see’ someone thus taking an action beyond the call of duty (i.e. acting ‘professionally’) on behalf of the employee.

Overall, the CSRs construct a unique role as helping employees and as those HR staff with a genuine feel for their mood. This account is particularly pertinent in light of the reorganisation of employee liaison responsibilities. They position themselves as ‘at the front line’ and utilise the employee welfare and advocacy discourse (an important aspect of HR work) to support their claim for legitimacy as HR professionals.

## Discussion

Taking a more social constructionist perspective on call centre work, and having the opportunity to explore what happens as a consequence of setting up a new call centre, reveals that the nature of professional service call centre work organization may be contested and constantly under negotiation. While useful as an overall classification, the labelling of individual call centres as a particular type may therefore obscure rather than illuminate the nature of call centre work (cf Batt and Moynihan, 2002). This article has examined in detail the manner in which these HR CSRs (both individually and collectively) attempted to *work up* their roles as ‘professionals’ in opposition to possible alternative constructions of routine and unskilled work practices. Having been positioned as not much more than an information source and, even in that, as adjuncts to the technology, the CSRs’ response to that challenge draws on both generic and specific professional discourses. Thus ‘being a HR professional’ in this context was both contested and involved considerable identity work to maintain. Drawing on both broad and locally developed understandings of professional activity, CSRs argued that their work is more complex than assumed, requiring professional knowledge and problem-solving skills which adds value to the client’s experience, and that they fulfil an important, and now unique, employee advocacy role within the HR function. As explored further below, the notion of client service resonates across understandings of call centre, professional and HR work and therefore provides useful leverage for these CSRs’ claims to professional identity.

The importance of team interaction in producing and supporting these constructions is also highlighted, albeit often within the private space of their own meetings. A significant feature of this process is the role of storytelling as a way of graphically illustrating the desired positioning of the work. Whether such stories relate to ‘real’ work processes is not the issue at stake. Rather it is suggested that these stories and the process of storytelling play a significant role in actively constructing the reality of professional work for these CSRs. Indeed, broader experience of this research project suggests that the ability to tell ‘war stories’ about employees is an important aspect of achieving credibility as a HR professional, at least amongst ones’ peers.

In particular, CSRs wove their stories to establish similarities and differences with other HR professionals in the organization. As reviewed earlier, the notion of establishing boundaries has been proposed in previous research (Goode and Greatbatch, 2005) as a process of separation or differentiation (e.g. between nurses and less qualified call handlers). However these findings enhance understanding of how complex boundary work is implicated in the multifarious process of establishing professional credibility. Here CSRs draw on both *being the same* as other HR professionals (through constructing similar work processes of analysing problems and identifying solutions) in order to legitimate their role as ‘professional’, whilst maintaining there are clear *differences* (in respect to the employee advocate role) to claim a valued and irreplaceable role requiring unique knowledge. Both technology and other HR professionals are positioned as passive and, indeed, out of touch, by the CSRs, who place themselves at the forefront of meeting the needs of the employees who make the calls. In doing so, they appear to stake a claim for a long standing professional niche – that of employee advocate – which has been somewhat overlooked in the HR department’s recent reorganization. Since no other group within the department appeared to be staking a claim to this particular role, the CSRs were able to employ this construction without placing themselves at risk of competition from other groups. It is proposed that these processes of compare and contrast are essential as the CSRs seek to establish their position within the local professional context of this HR department.

## **Conclusion**

Previous empirical work has focused on social and medical care provision as the broader institutional and organizational context for professional service call centres, with some speculation that these may differ from commercial contexts. Based on this analysis it is suggested that both the broader professional and local organizational context need to be considered in understanding the factors at work in constructing call centre work. This research supports previous general conclusions regarding the challenge of constructing professional identity (Dent and Whitehead, 2001) but offers further detailed analysis of the (individual and collective) processes by which different constructions of knowledge, identity and practice emerge and interact. For example, not only are call centre teams important mechanisms for coping with the work (Mulholland, 2002, Korczynski, 2003), for sharing ‘insider’ knowledge (van den Broek et al., 2008) and also potential sites of resistance (Townsend, 2005) – as indeed they are here - they also are important sources for the social construction and legitimation of call centre work – here as ‘professional’.

The strategic re-orientation of HR left these CSRs with less favourable ‘identities’ as reactive information handlers rather than proactive HR solutions providers. A position which may be further compounded by general conceptions of incompatibility between call centre and professional work. This study has demonstrated how this re-orientation prompted the CSRs to try to reclaim their professional identities, and more specifically to claim the important welfare and advocate role left vacant with the move towards a strategic focus. This article furthers the understanding of the specific organizational consequences of the strategic re-orientation of HR, demonstrating the identity work involved as different HR roles re-negotiate their positions and argues for more sensitivity to the implications for staff involved. Further development of the ideas put forward in this research may be of practical benefit to organizations embarking on similar reorganizations, particularly in highlighting potential areas of tension as implementation unfolds. The emphasis on how work is constructed, as opposed to an operational focus on the performance of tasks and job roles, may provide a useful alternative perspective to consider the impact of such reorganizations on those involved.

The examination of a hitherto under-explored aspect of professional identity work also provides the possibility of further extending understanding of the social construction of professional work. Previous research from this perspective has tended to look at the construction of boundaries *between* rather than *within* professions. For

example, Devine et al (2000) examine *inter*-profession competition, yet here the notion of *intra*-profession competition seems particularly pertinent (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). An area of future development therefore would be to integrate this social constructionist perspective with the broader, structural analysis of individual professions. For example, applying Ackroyd and Muzio's (2007) concept of 'elongated professional hierarchies' (p741) to the HR profession may offer a useful extension of analytic framework offered here.

The need for more detailed examination of such issues within the HR profession is also necessary to understand how such competition may unfold. For example, the potential acceptance of call centre work as a legitimate aspect of HR professional work more broadly may be perceived as problematic in light of wider strategic aims and positioning vis-à-vis other groups of professionals. Further it prompts consideration of the challenges new modes of working may pose professional identity construction, particularly here with respect to the role of technology. If working in a HR call centre might be constructed as 'professional work', could this pave the way for an increasing technological mediation of other areas of HR practice?

This research has a number of limitations both in terms of the context studied and the approach adopted. While it was important to extend the research in offering a new occupational context for study, this inevitably makes direct comparison with existing research more complicated. Furthermore, while the more explicit focus on the micro-processes of constructing professional service call centre work in this article, there is as a result more limited consideration of broader institutional framing. Further research which investigates the relationships between these different levels of analysis would be beneficial to the field.

In conclusion, this study has examined how professional identity can be maintained in a call centre environment. The findings problematise the notion both of what it means to be a 'professional' and to be a 'call centre representative', suggesting that while others' representations of call centre work may present challenges to maintaining a professional identity, CSRs are active in responding to that challenge and through stories and teamwork, construct their work as complex, irreplaceable and distinctive. Whether this agency can be maintained in the face of increasing technological mediation of call centre work (see Russell, 2008, Smith et al., 2008) remains to be seen.

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